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SUBJECT: Trinidad and Tobago February Political Round-Up

¶1. The following were notable February political developments:

- T&T's murder rate above that of 2008
- Jamaat's TT\$32 million debt
- Freedom of religion versus right to education
- Shortage of Catholic priests
- Suffering foreign detainees
- Integrity Commission resigns

T&T's murder rate above that of 2008

¶2. As of February 28, the country had recorded 100 murders. Acting Police Commissioner James Philbert said at a press briefing that gang violence contributed to the increased murder rate and observed that there was a surge of young people involved in gangs.

¶3. Prominent attorney and independent Senator Dana Seetahal predicted there will be approximately 640 homicides by the end of 2009, based on the current rate. Seetahal has called on the government to pass anti-gang legislation and declare a state of emergency in limited areas of Trinidad and Tobago in order to stem the upsurge of crime.

Jamaat's TT\$32 million debt

¶4. The Privy Council (T&T's highest court of appeal) has reserved judgment in a case involving Abu Bakr. Following an attempted coup in 1990, the court awarded damages in the sum of TT\$15 million dollars (US\$2.5million) to the government for the destruction by the Jamaat of several properties. Bakr refused to settle the debt at the time and it has now grown to TT\$32 million. Bakr claims in a sworn statement that the PNM government promised to wipe out the debt in exchange for Jamaat assistance to it in 2002 general election campaign.

¶5. After the local court of appeals threw out the claim, Bakr and his attorneys asked the Privy Council to rule on the matter. If the Privy Council rules in favor of the Jamaat, then the statement would be entered into evidence and the local court would have to determine whether it was a fair agreement that should be enforced. If the Privy Council rules otherwise, then the government can move forward, if it so chooses, to sell all eleven Jamaat properties to satisfy the TT\$32 million debt.

Freedom of Religion versus Right to Education

¶6. Recently the principal of a Roman Catholic school barred a seven-year old Rastafarian girl from attending school unless she agreed to wear a covering on her head. The imposition of this requirement on the child caused a furor involving the child's mother, the principal of the school and an attorney representing the child. Eventually, the principal retracted her directive to the child, stating that she could return to school on the condition that her hair was "neat and tidy."

¶7. The child's attorney labeled the principal's request as subjective and asked for clarification. He went on to state that it is ludicrous that a child is being denied her right to education because of her hair. The right to an education is guaranteed by T&T's constitution, he underscored. The resolution of this matter remains pending.

Shortage of Catholic priests

¶8. Archbishop Edward Gilbert lamented that the shortage of priests has gotten worse and more challenging over the years. He recently remarked that only two men in a population of 1.3 million people in T&T were entering seminary to become priests. Gilbert also stated that for too long the church had been silent on issues of racism and the gap between rich and poor. He called on all priests to urgently deal with these matters.

Suffering foreign detainees

¶9. Prisoners from Ghana, Senegal and Nigeria staged a hunger strike at the Maximum Security Prison in an attempt to get the attention of the T&T government. They say they are languishing in prison and want to be sent home. The 20-odd prisoners reportedly have not committed any crime in Trinidad except entering the country illegally. The prisoners intend to keep up the strike until the government gives in to their demand to pay for their return to their respective homelands. However, prison officials note that the prisoners must pay their own airfare.

Integrity Commission resigns

¶10. The entire Integrity Commission resigned and apologized to the President February 4 following a High Court ruling February 3 that it had acted in bad faith in relation to former Minister of Trade and Industry Dr Keith Rowley. The High Court Judge found the Integrity Commission members guilty of misfeasance in public office.

¶11. The Integrity Commission, empowered to investigate allegations of corruption by public officials, had investigated 2006 allegations that construction material was diverted from the Tobago hospital to a private housing development owned by Rowley's wife. However, when the Integrity Commission received the report, they ignored the advice of their attorney that Rowley should be presented with the findings of the investigation and be allowed to respond to the allegations.

¶12. Rowley, in response, filed a suit against the Integrity Commission claiming that he was not given a fair opportunity to be heard, either in person or through his attorneys. Rowley stated further that the Integrity Commission had ulterior motives. The judge in the case took a similar stance when she stated in her judgment that "there was an unfair abuse of power on the part of the Integrity Commission." The judge awarded Rowley US\$16,000 in damages with interest.

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